

Yard & Garden

How to guarantee your garden starts off on the right foot

As winter slowly winds down, many gardeners cannot wait to soak up the springtime sun and get their hands dirty in the garden. Such excitement is not just good for gardeners, but can benefit the garden in the months to come as well.

Late winter or early spring is a great time to get a head start on the gardening season. Even if gardening season is still around the corner, completing the following projects can ensure your garden gets off on the right foot.

Clear debris

One of the best things you can do for your garden as winter winds down is to clear it of debris. Winter can be especially harsh on a landscape, and gardens left to the elements are often filled with debris once spring arrives. Dead leaves, fallen branches, rocks that surfaced during the winter frost, and even garbage that might have blown about in winter winds can all pile up in a garden over a typical winter. Clearing such debris likely won't take long, but it's a great first step toward restoring the garden before the time comes to plant and grow the garden once again.

Examine the soil

Soil plays a significant role in whether a garden thrives or struggles. Examining the soil before the season starts can help gardeners address any issues before they plant. Ignoring the soil until a

problem arises can turn the upcoming gardening season into a lost opportunity, so test the soil to determine if it has any nutrient or mineral deficiencies. This may require the help of a professional, but if a problem arises, you might be able to adjust the acidity or alkalinity of the soil and still enjoy a successful gardening season.

Another way to examine the soil is less complex but can shed light on when would be a good time to get back to work. Reach into the soil and dig out a handful. If the soil quickly crumbles, you can start preparing for gardening seasoning. But if the soil is still clumped together, it needs more time to dry out before you can begin your prep work.

Initiate edging

Edging is another task gardeners can begin as they get ready for the season. Edge plant and flower beds, but be sure to use a spade with a flat blade or an edger designed to edge flower beds. Such tools will cut deep enough so grass roots that may eventually grow into the flower bed are severed. Depending on how large a garden is, edging can be a time-consuming task, so getting a head start allows homeowners to spend more time planting and tending to their gardens once the season hits full swing.

Fight weeds

Though weeds likely have not survived the winter, that does not mean they won't return once the weather starts to heat up. But as inevitable as weeds may seem, homeowners can take steps to prevent them from turning beautiful gardens into battlegrounds where plants, flowers and vegetables are pitted against unsightly and potentially harmful weeds. Spring is a good time to apply a

pre-emergent weed preventer, which can stop weeds before they grow. Though such solutions are not always foolproof, they can drastically reduce the likelihood of weed growth.

Though gardeners might not be able to start planting their gardens in late winter or early spring, they can still get outside and take steps to ensure their gardens thrive once planting season begins.

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Weed out gardening myths

Gardening is an age-old activity that was once a necessity but has transformed into a hobby for thousands of people. While gardening still serves practical purposes, many gardeners still consider it a hobby first and foremost.

Time-tested gardening techniques have prevailed, but there remain certain myths about gardening that are best dispelled. The following are some of the more common myths associated with gardening.

* MYTH: Compost tea is more effective than traditional compost. All over North America and the United Kingdom, gardeners have jumped on board the compost tea bandwagon. Compost tea is a fertilizer created by steeping compost in water mixed with sugar in brewing kits. The mixture is allowed to sit and aerate to encourage beneficial organism growth before it is sprayed on plants. According to supporters, compost tea suppresses disease and boosts plant yields. However, there is no evidence to suggest that compost tea works any better than adding compost in its normal state to the soil. In fact, leaving buckets of the "tea" around to ferment could actually create a breeding ground for E coli and other bacteria.

* MYTH: Plants under stress should be fertilized. This is not the case. Horticulturists advise that fertilizing plants that are not deficient in nutrients can actually add to existing stress levels for plants. Plants are not often stressed by a lack of food, but rather heat, faulty planting or space constraints. A fed plant will use the energy to absorb the nutrients instead of defending against a blight or establishing better root systems.

* MYTH: Young trees need stakes. It may be tempting to stake that little sapling to protect it against the weather and strong winds, but doing so may actually work against the founding tree. Staking trees to inhibit swaying may not stim-

ulate the tree to grow thicker, lower trunks that will help the tree in the long run. The Royal Horticultural Society recommends that saplings be staked for around one year and then have the stakes removed to encourage the tree to be strong and stable on its own.

* MYTH: Water droplets and sunshine lead to burnt leaves. Gardeners have been told to resist watering their plants during the hottest times of the day. Many assume it's because water droplets lying on leaves will magnify the sun's rays and burn the leaves. According to Dr. Gabor Horvath at the Eotvoes University in Budapest, water droplets will rarely damage plants because the drops are too close to the leaves to cause burning before they evaporate. Watering during the hottest points of the day is not advised because water evaporates and gets wasted.

* MYTH: Sand added to clay soil makes it looser and better for plants. Clay soil is a deterrent to gardening because it can be so hard to dig and difficult to cultivate, but some feel it's best to add sand to the clay to make it a better soil mixture. You would need a great deal of sand to do this in the right manner, but many gardeners simply dig a hole, add sand and hope for the best. However, water runoff will pool in the sand and not be absorbed by the clay, potentially causing the plants to drown.

* MYTH: Adding compost or potting soil to the planting hole for a tree or shrub is beneficial. Gardeners frequently add compost or potting soil to the hole where the root ball of a tree or shrub will be placed. But this encourages the roots to grow only in this nutrient-rich area, rather than spreading throughout the landscape to form a stronger and more durable root system. If you are going to amend the soil, do so evenly across the landscape.

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Get kids excited about gardening

Many adults understand the joy of gardening, but gardening can be equally fun for children as well. While some adults may feel that certain children do not have the patience or perseverance to see plants grow from seeds to adulthood, selecting plants that are hardy and sprout quickly may be the key to igniting a love of gardening in children.

Choosing seeds that sprout quickly can hold the attention of children who are new to gardening. Many different plants fit this bill. Beans, peas, sunflower seeds, and bell pepper seeds are easy to start and germinate quickly. In addition, many leafy vegetables, such as chard, lettuce, spinach, and mustard, germinate in three to five days. Herbs, such as basil and parsley, also sprout fast. All of these plants are good options for introducing children to gardening, as each provides quick gratification.

To further interest children, it is a good idea to plant seeds in a way that allows youngsters to monitor the progress of growth. Use a transparent container, such as rinsed-out glass jars and canisters, to house the plant. Such containers give kids an unobstructed view of the process, during which children can plot the progress of seed germination and easily spot root and stem development. Once the seedlings grow larger, they can be transplanted into different containers.

Many seedlings can sprout with water alone. Children can easily grow new plants from clippings of a mature plant left resting in a shallow cup of water, and seeds may not even need soil to germi-

nate. Kids may have luck sprinkling seeds on a dampened, crumpled-up piece of paper towel. Cotton balls also make a

good place to nestle seeds. Either material will hold on to water, keeping the seeds moist until they sprout. Afterward, the

seedlings can be carefully moved into a soil-and-compost mix. The paper towel and the cotton balls will decompose and add to the organic matter already in the soil.

Edible plants often make good choices for children because kids can reap the rewards of their efforts. Herbs can be sprinkled onto food, or fruits and vegetables can be grown in containers and then served at mealtime. Kids can show pride in their accomplishments, especially if they have tangible results on the dinner plate.

Children who want to try something different can explore other types of plants. Aquatic plants, or those found at the pet store to grow in aquariums, can be easy to grow.

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